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Prayers in America. Candlelight vigil reflects concern about nuclear danger.

ed on Western Europe up to 243 over the past 18 months.

Similarly, Washington officials say, the Soviets already are operating missile-firing submarines off the coast of the United States.

Some observers believe that, however much the Soviets might hope to generate a sense of crisis, they are inhibited. The reason: The Soviet Politburo presumably is preoccupied with a power struggle, sparked by the illness of Andropov that kept him out of public view for more than three months.

Russia's strategy appears calculated to exploit widespread antinuclear sentiment in Western Europe by seeking to pin responsibility on the U.S. for tension and an escalation of the arms race. The idea is to convince Europeans that cooperation with the U.S. endangers their security while cooperation with Russia brings economic benefits.

Looking toward Bonn. With the major opposition party in Bonn, the Social Democrats, turning against the Euromissile plan and sliding toward semi-neutralism, Moscow still sees possibilities to exploit in West Germany. The objective presumably is to induce the government to reverse or dilute its support for American missiles, or at least to bring pressure on the U.S. to offer more concessions to the Soviets.

So far, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl has shown no sign of wavering, nor have leaders in Britain and Italy, which also are getting the first of the American missiles.

The allies—which asked for the missiles in the first place—still insist that the only way Moscow can stop or limit deployment in Western Europe is through negotiations with Washington. □

By ROBERT S. DUDNEY

The Day After "The Day After"

No one questions the horrors of nuclear war. But it will take more than hand wringing to prevent that catastrophe.

A television program viewed in nearly 39 million American homes is refocusing attention on the most compelling issue facing the nation today—nuclear war.

In the wake of "The Day After," which depicted the devastation of Lawrence, Kans., in an atomic conflagration, that issue is being debated in every conceivable forum across the country—town meetings, TV and radio talk shows, newspaper columns and hearings on Capitol Hill.

The debate is unfolding against the ominous background of a new Soviet-American face-off in Europe and signs of an escalating arms race.

The questions now being argued in public on an unprecedented scale have haunted policymakers for a quarter of a century—

Can the danger of nuclear war be banished? If not, what is the most effective way to minimize the risk that atomic weapons will ever be used? And, how can the arms race best be brought under control?

Among leaders of America's antinuclear movement as well as top Reagan administration officials, the ABC Network's "The Day After" was expected to have a profound impact on the shape of the nuclear debate. One group hoped and the other feared that the result would be a backlash against the administration's nuclear policies.

The actual effect of the TV program is turning out to be quite different.

Few were changed. While millions were deeply moved by the televised spectacle of an atomic holocaust, there is no sign of an emotional rush to reverse the administration's nuclear-arms buildup or force a switch from the strategy of deterrence.

In fact, opinion polls conducted before and after the television program indicate little change in popular attitudes on these issues. While they show continuing overwhelming support for a Soviet-American agreement to freeze nuclear arsenals, there is no sign of a decline in support for Reagan's defense buildup. One poll actually shows substantially greater backing for the President's conduct of foreign policy.

This is seen as evidence that the vast majority of Americans, horrifying as they find the prospect of nuclear war, still support a policy based on American strength and a strategy of deterrence.

Does all this mean that Reagan now can count on clear sailing for his nuclear-defense policy? Not so, say key White House aides.

While he is in a stronger position to resist any new challenge to the MX missile and other major weapons pro-

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grams, these officials stress that the President still must work hard to keep the nuclear-deterrence issue defused.

In an effort to neutralize the issue, officials say, the President will stress even more the search for a nuclear-arms agreement with the Soviets in the campaign year ahead, despite the Russian walkout from Geneva negotiations on medium-range nuclear weapons.

The White House is especially sensitive to a drive by the antinuclear movement to capitalize on the shock effect of "The Day After" in an attempt to regain impetus after the September defeat of a nuclear-freeze resolution in Congress.

In the debate taking shape, there is common ground among the protagonists: Nuclear war would be an unparalleled catastrophe, surpassing even the horror seen in "The Day After," and there is no escape from America's nuclear predicament.

As Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger put it: "We cannot banish the discoveries of nuclear physics; neither can we leave these discoveries to other nations, which may be less appalled by their prospect."

Since atomic arms can't be "disinvented" or unilaterally scrapped by the U.S., the debate is focusing basically on this question: What can the U.S. do to insure that these weapons are never used? The administration maintains that there is no alternative to the strategy of deterrence that both Democratic and Republican Presidents have pursued for the past 35 years.

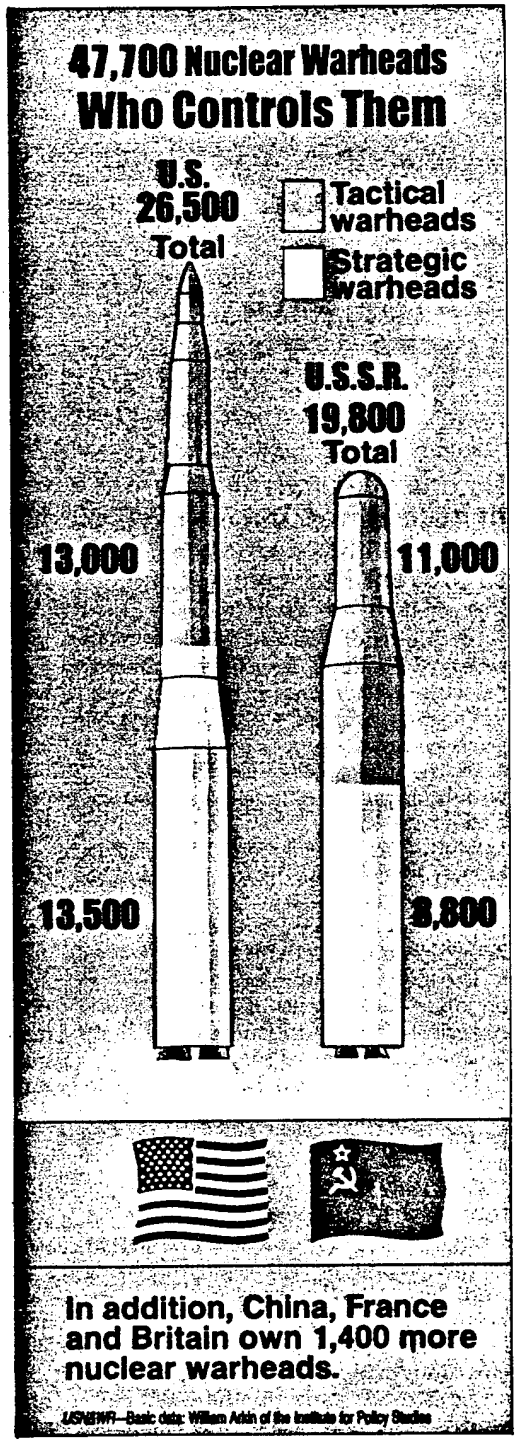
That strategy, which is based on the threat of nuclear retaliation, is summed up by Defense Secretary Weinberger: "We must convince any potential adversaries that the cost of aggression by them would be far higher than any possible benefit."

In the controversy, the arguments revolve around four propositions that proponents claim will reduce the danger of war and curb the arms race:

Nuclear freeze. Advocates maintain that a Soviet-American agreement to bar any further production, development or testing of atomic weapons is the most effective way to reduce the risk of a superpower conflict. They claim that Russia and the U.S., with more than 40,000 nuclear warheads between them, already have far more than they need for a rational policy of deterrence. Freeze proponents argue that a continuing buildup multiplies the danger that some weapons eventually will be used.

The Reagan administration opposes a freeze because it would lock the U.S. into a position of inferiority that could tempt Russia to actually launch a first strike in a crisis. Officials cite Russia's monopoly of highly accurate, multiwarhead intercontinental ballistic missiles as a major Soviet advantage.

The President insists that the U.S. must redress the balance by deploying its own supermissile—the MX—and at the same time seek an agreement for substantial reductions in superpower arsenals to equal levels.



No first use. A fundamental change in current strategy is advocated by a group of former high-level officials, including McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy's national-security adviser, and former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. They call for a policy that would bar the first use of nuclear weapons by the U.S. in any circumstances—and particularly in response to a Soviet conventional attack in Europe.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization has rejected this idea because it would increase Moscow's temptation to use conventional forces to overrun the Continent. But, Gen. Bernard Rogers, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, and a number of other influential officers are calling for what is termed a no-early-use nuclear-weapons strategy. They are pressing for a significant boost in NATO conventional strength in order to reduce dependence on atomic arms.

Defense in space. President Reagan calls for the development of a space-based missile-defense system as the most effective way in the long run to protect the U.S. against nuclear war. His proposal has sparked intense controversy, with critics charging that it would cost at least 100 billion dollars and prove inadequate. But the scheme is likely to remain as a central feature of the nuclear debate.

War by accident. Senators Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and John Warner (R-Va.) are pushing a plan to establish so-called nuclear-risk-reduction centers in Washington and Moscow. They make the point that "there are an increasing number of scenarios that could precipitate the outbreak of nuclear war that neither side anticipated or intended, possibly involving other nuclear powers or terrorist groups."

The risk-reduction centers, manned jointly by Russians and Americans and linked to each nation's top political leadership in times of crisis, would work to prevent the superpowers from stumbling into war because of misunderstanding, miscalculation or incidents precipitated by terrorists or a small nuclear power.

To sum up: While there is universal acceptance of the message of "The Day After"—that nuclear war would be the ultimate catastrophe—there also is widespread recognition that it will take more than hand wringing to prevent it from happening. □

By JOSEPH FROMM with JAMES M. HILDRETH and ORR KELLY